

atlanta's home for jazz

TINY CHURCHILL GROUNDS
NOURISHES FANS, SHOWCASES
TALENT WHILE KEEPING ALIVE
A MUSICAL TRADITION THAT
MAY HAVE PEAKED IN THE '70S



JOHN AMIS / Special

"I'm presenting something that's so valuable . . . music that's food for the soul," says Churchill Grounds owner Sam Yi.

By James Rozzi

FOR THE JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

It's 10:25 on a Saturday night. At a small downtown Atlanta nightclub called Churchill Grounds, the jazz quintet onstage performs with only a pane of glass between them and the sidewalk along Peachtree Street.

As the Fox Theatre next door empties, the band is in the middle of a heated, notey exchange. The saxophonist, with back arched and horn raised overhead, is blowing

torrents of post-Coltrane primordial shrieks while the pianist lays down a barrage of Thelonious Monk-inspired knuckle chords. Cymbals clash, drums boom. The audience is on the edge of its seats. The stream of people pouring out of the Fox hears the music, sees the band. Most pause momentarily as they pass on the way to their cars, but they walk by.

Welcome to jazz, Atlanta style — where the musicians are superb, the venues few and the patronage spotty at best. In this metro area of 3 million-plus people, the one standout jazz listening room is a tiny, acoustically overzealous cigar, martini and coffee bar named

after a man who smoked a big one. Churchill Grounds, capacity 60, is the one place in town where you can hear burning, straight-ahead jazz six nights a week, from both emerging local artists and performers of national note, in a respectful atmosphere.

Everything in the joint smacks of jazz. The walls are covered with local artists' paintings, of black musicians blowing horns of every type. The small, muted television mounted over the bar is showing an old black-and-white film clip of trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie dancing and mugging in front of his big band. Smoke

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